

Up again down again

by

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When was the last time a U.S. Army Signal Corps unit had a lighter-than-air balloon platoon? 1861? 1898? 1918? 1942?

Wrong. The answer (and it will surprise many) is 1968. The place: the Mekong Delta. The unit: the 9th Signal Battalion, 9th Infantry Division.

The Signal Corps has had balloon platoons at all those other time periods so history does repeat itself. One parallel concerns an instance just before the move to Dong Tam, when a balloon wrapped itself around a large tree at the division base camp at Bear Cat. This was a repeat of an incident which occurred July 21, 1861, when the Chief Signal Officer's impatience to get to a battle before it ended resulted in the Union Army's only balloon of that day being impaled on a tree limb. [Who was the officer? See pages 8-16.—Ed.]

There were other balloon activities during the Civil War, including observation balloons sent up by the Union forces on the lower peninsula of Virginia to observe activities of the Confederates at Sewell's Point on the Norfolk side of Hampton Roads. But it wasn't until the Spanish-American War that the Signal Corps deployed its first balloon to an overseas combat area. It was reported that the balloon's main activity appeared to be serving as a target for Spanish marksmen.

The balloon used in Cuba was the only one the Army had at the start of the war. It was a homemade model of silk with a capacity of 15,000 cubic feet of hydrogen gas. Once shot down, it had to be shipped home because of the lack of equipment to repair it.

The lessons learned from the use of the balloon in Cuba were not all bad; other countries of the world began military balloon programs. U.S. development also continued and in 1908 the Army Signal Corps took delivery of *Dirigible Number One*, a gas-filled balloon powered by a gasoline engine. The buildup in free, powered, and captive gas balloon craft reached its peak just before World War I and then declined as the war progressed. As balloon guns and armed

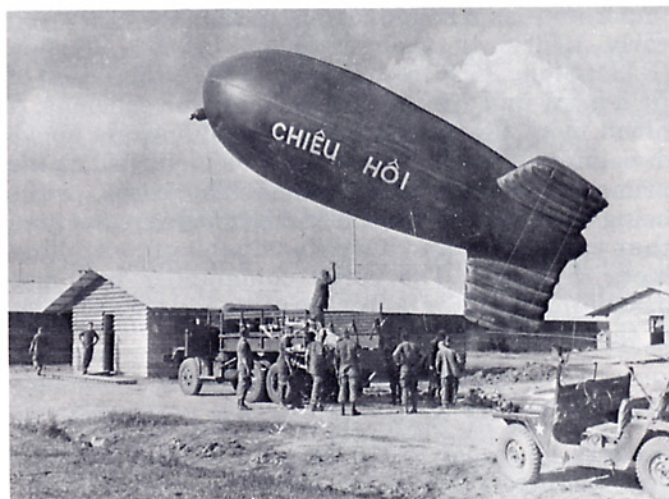


aircraft became more plentiful, the number of balloons in the combat theater decreased.

The use of balloons in World War II brought new and ingenious developments, including the use by the Japanese to carry incendiary bombs to the northwestern United States.

The 9th Signal Battalion's balloon activities began in 1967 when the long-range patrols found they were frequently unable to communicate with their base headquarters. They rigged up captive gas balloons to act as aerial radio relay stations. The balloons they used were approximately 33 feet long, 9 feet in diameter, and they held about 4,000 cubic feet of helium. The techniques of balloon-handling operations had to be learned the hard way and from the beginning. It was a sharp sergeant with a lot of initiative who developed the knowhow to keep the sometimes patched radio relay platforms flying.

Then there was the day that high winds at Dong Tam snapped the mooring cable and the "Red Baron" of the 9th Aviation Battalion went up to shoot down the balloon. The balloon got away and was last seen headed north. If it did not destroy itself,



ABOVE—The words "CHIEU HOI" painted on this balloon were to give publicity to a program to motivate Viet Cong to rally to the South Vietnamese government.

LEFT—Army balloons used in the Mekong Delta had their "ups and downs"—in this case, one very deflated balloon chose a tree for a landing zone.

it surely must have caused consternation wherever it came down.

While no one can predict what the future may hold for the versatile military balloons, even though frequently deflated in the last 100 years, they have always risen again to meet some new requirement.